

The Tudors and Beyond (1485-1689). Politics and Representation in England

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Modern-day visitors to the Palace of Westminster in London, seat of the Houses of Parliament, are informed that armed police officers are visible on the premises. ¹ Security measures like this, however deplorable, are hardly unusual. On the annual opening day of the parliamentary session, however, a very different security team roams the Houses of Parliament at 10 a.m. A group in bright red sixteenth-century uniforms, carrying old-fashioned oil lamps, searches the Westminster cellars for hidden explosives. This poorly equipped but gaudily dressed security force are the Beefeaters (officially: Yeomen Warders) who usually guard the Tower of London.

The searching of the cellars is the beginning of an elaborate ceremony that marks the annual State Opening of Parliament. ² It was first introduced as a safety routine after the Gunpowder Plot: Guy Fawkes and Catholic conspirators' failed attempt to blow up the House of Lords and James I on November 5, 1605. In fact, many of the ritualized gestures and words, uniforms and objects involved in the State Opening re-enact events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, commemorating past events that still have significance for a present-day, democratic polity.

1485–1603: Tudor Sacral Monarchy

As we just heard, the searching of the Westminster cellars is conducted by the Yeomen Warders, a corps created by Henry VII as a personal bodyguard. Henry, from the Welsh house of Tudor, needed protection in 1485: his claim to the English throne had yet to be confirmed after his victory over Richard III in the battle of Bosworth Field. Henry VII's accession ended the Wars of the Roses between the York and Lancaster branches of the Plantagenet dynasty. The ensuing Tudor period from 1485-1603 and the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I

are often considered as a time of innovation, discovery and national greatness: ³ independence from the Roman Catholic Church; an unprecedented cultural flourishing epitomized by Shakespeare; voyages to the New World and around the globe (Francis Drake), leading to a first attempt to settle in North America in 1583. The myth of a golden Tudor age, though, is the tip of an iceberg kept afloat by a major redistribution of people, land and wealth inside and outside Britain. Moreover, cultural, regional, political and religious fault lines developed in the sixteenth century that would erupt in civil war in the seventeenth century.

Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic church in 1534 established a national church and a new ruling elite. Pope Clement VII's final refusal to annul Henry's first, childless marriage to Catherine of Aragon in 1534 might have left him without a successor. (Henry eventually married six times; two wives, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, were executed for allegations of treason.) Securing the right to remarry solved the problem of dynastic continuity – which was important because the reproduction of royal bodies through children kept royal families in power, and marriages forged political alliances.

Henry VIII redefined kingship as *sacral monarchy*: the monarch by divine right is not bound by human law, and ordained by God. Accordingly, Henry VIII preferred legislation by proclamation rather than parliamentary procedure. The idea of absolute monarchical sovereignty and its opposite, the idea of popular sovereignty, would later become “the ideas that underlay the British Civil Wars of the seventeenth century and shaped the Atlantic and colonialist traditions, notably in North America”. ⁴ Like the medieval concept of kingship, sacral monarchy rested on embodiment: the monarch's physical, mortal body manifests the second, immortal body of sovereignty. Consequently, royal bodies are not only vital for continuing and connecting dynasties but also for representing authority.

Monarchic rule depended on the nobility's loyalty and compliance (for example in raising armies), and on their local kinship, friendships and allegiances. ⁵ The new independence from papal authority and the founding of a new national church created an opportunity to forge and strengthen such loyalties: church property was confiscated and monasteries were dissolved in England, Wales and Ireland between 1532 and 1540. In the largest redistribution of property in early modernity, land was sold and given to loyal followers. Administrative reforms initiated

under Henry VII and refined by chief minister Thomas Cromwell replaced local lords with crown servants, and reforms in councils and other regional government institutions further reduced the influence of old aristocratic networks.

The redistribution of land had long-term effects. It started the process of converting a largely subsistence-based agriculture into a surplus-oriented and wage-based one. Peasants had to migrate or accept wage labor when the commons (collectively cultivated pasture land) were converted into private property and enclosed for sheep grazing. Wage-earners made up 50% of the English population by 1600; their purchasing power diminished by two thirds between 1500 and 1610.⁶ Gentry and nobility profited from the emerging land market and invested in trade: an estimated half of the peerage and many landowners put money into joint stock companies, foreign trade and plantation colonies between 1575 and 1630.⁷ Among the trade companies founded after mid-century are the Africa Company (1588) and the East India Company (1600). Explorative voyages and England's transatlantic expansion were driven by private enterprises, and even the naval victory over the Spanish armada in 1588, which marked England's ascendancy over Spain as the main colonial power in the Americas, was won by privately sponsored battleships.⁸

The reach of these structural changes (centralizing political power, easing fiscal problems) was limited, though. Ireland, Scotland and northern England remained mostly Catholic, and started rebellions against the imposition of the reformed faith (Protestantism) as well as Henry VIII's disregard of parliament, which would have represented local interests.⁹ The southerners were quick to attribute resistance in the north and in the Celtic-speaking areas to a lack of civilization, degeneracy or foreign (Catholic) interference.¹⁰ These attitudes became blueprints for justifying the extremely violent conquest and colonization of Ireland (from 1536 to the 1650s) and for legitimizing maltreatment of people from northern, Celtic and colonial regions.

Religion remained a contested issue inextricably linked with politics and culture even after the reign of Henry VIII and his son Edward VI. Catholicism was (briefly) reintroduced by Mary Tudor when she took to the throne in 1553, and she had at least 300 Protestants burned as heretics. The drastic measure backfired – the victims were commemorated as martyrs in one of the century's bestselling books, John Foxe's *The Book of Martyrs* (1563). But Mary also initiated the colonization of Catholic

Ireland by plantations. When England returned to the reformed faith with Elizabeth I in 1558, liturgy and church organization were designed to appeal to a broad spectrum of religious orientations, combining reformed with traditional elements.

Despite these efforts, however, the Church of England, with the monarch as head, still found little acceptance from radical reformed groups who rejected bishops, ordained priests and ornate robes as well as images and ceremonies as distractions from reading the holy scriptures, and as restrictions of the liberty of conscience. Scottish Calvinists and Presbyterians discussed resistance to (monarchic) tyranny, while endorsing the same strict patriarchy as the English dissenters or Puritans (as they were derogatorily called).¹¹ In the seventeenth century, the North American colonies became a refuge for persecuted dissenters, as for example the Pilgrim Fathers who started the Plymouth colony in the 1620s. In England, radical reformed groups experimented with republican ideas and egalitarian forms of social organization.

Representing Sacral Monarchy

Why are Tudor monarchs remembered as powerful rulers despite the political instability of the British Isles and their poor fiscal, military and administrative resources?¹² A cultural historian argues that

from the reign of Henry VIII [...] there was a new emphasis on, and new attempts to control, *images of power* – through the royal word, portraits, buildings, and festivals. The break from Rome made necessary the constitution of a *new political culture*, and it was arguably this new political culture that secured the Tudor dynasty and the English state.¹³

Henry VIII and Elizabeth I mediated sacral monarchy by making use of religious practices, images, performances and symbols. Like the nobility, the two monarchs supported painters, poets, dramatists, architects, tailors and artisans without, however, being able to fully control their representations of monarchy.¹⁴ They also tapped into the unruly, market-based culture of print, and into humanist learning, both of which disseminated ideas and knowledge but also criticism to an increasingly literate public.

Henry VIII – or rather Henry’s body posing assertively with legs apart and

elbows pointing outwards, shoulders emphasized by padded sleeves – became “the first ruler whom most English people, and many outside England, recognize[d]” from the portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger.¹⁵ In the sixteenth century, such portraits were exchanged and travelled as diplomatic gifts; nobles added them to their picture galleries, and engravings were reproduced to be circulated widely. The king also presented his body regularly to the populace in royal progresses, moving the whole court with an entourage of 800 people from London to residences of the nobility.¹⁶ Elizabeth I likewise spent 1,200 days of her reign travelling – though only in the English south.

Elizabeth I’s official portraits present an eternally youthful body whose physicality and gender recedes behind ornate and occasionally masculine clothes as signifiers of authority.¹⁷ Their impersonal impression was intentional: they were policy statements, not pictures of an individual. Elizabeth’s body represented political and religious sovereignty and England itself as a divinely “inspired nation”.¹⁸ Unmarried, Elizabeth appropriated a core element of Catholic worship, the cult of Virgin Mary, when she presented herself as ‘the Virgin Queen’ and stepped into a place the reformed faith had left empty. Inviting her subjects to transfer their affection and awe to herself thus served her political and religious policy.

Symbols for chastity, like the sieve in George Gower’s (1579) and Quentin Metsys’ (1583) portraits, had further political significance. The monarch’s body represents the kingdom, but the *virginal* female body could now signify an inviolate *territory* safe from invasion.¹⁹ The first Tudor to include the regalia (the imperial crown and scepter) in a portrait (the Darnley portrait, 1575), Elizabeth is depicted as a victorious territorial ruler in the Ditchley portrait (1592), with a map of Britain under her feet. In the Armada portrait (1588), the Spanish fleet is sinking behind her while she points to a globe displaying North America. Territorial claims are extended from the (still divided) kingdoms of Britain to the not yet permanently settled North American region named Virginia (after the Virgin Queen). The portraits use the new media of map and globe for a cultural construction of nationhood before its full geopolitical realization.²⁰

Affective ties between monarch and subjects were also created by poetic praise (e.g. Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, 1590), and by smaller, mobile media. Miniature royal portraits became popular in the 1580s. Kept in locket at first, they initiated a fashion for royal portraits on

household items like plates or pitchers.²¹ Images of the queen on medals, coins and paper gave the monarchy a virtual presence even in ordinary settings.

Authority mediated in this way did not necessarily lead to increased power and control, though. While official portraiture was to some extent under Elizabeth's control, the dissemination of her images and praise, and even public ceremonies, were not. Multiple voices commented on progresses, royal entries or appearances in print.²² As quasi-theatrical performances, public appearances always involved multiple interests and participants. The commercial theatre itself, centered in London since the 1570s, but also touring the countryside, turned into a space where forms of representation – including those of authority – were held up to public inspection.

Civil War and Republic: The Seventeenth Century

The seventeenth century is overshadowed by civil war. The causes and consequences of these conflicts are difficult to determine, as the confusing historiographical terminology demonstrates. Historians count *three* civil wars between crown and parliament (1642-1651), or *a* War of the Three Kingdoms (England, Scotland, and Ireland). For England between 1649 (the execution of Charles I) and 1660 (the accession of Charles II) the terms 'republic' as well as 'military-religious dictatorship' under Oliver Cromwell can be found. The kingless episode is called the Interregnum, but for others the regicide was the English Revolution, anticipating the French abolition of absolutism in 1789.²³ But wasn't there also a so-called Glorious Revolution in 1688/1689? What's that all about?

A new confessional polarity is once again behind the "civil wars *within* and *between* the kingdoms" of England, Ireland and Scotland:²⁴ political, cultural and economic issues cluster around support for radical Protestantism, traditional Catholicism or the official Church of England. When the king of Scotland, James VI, a Stuart, became James I, king of England, Scotland and Ireland in 1603, neither he nor his son Charles I achieved the unity suggested by this accumulation of royal titles. James' strict policy against both Puritans and Catholics – before and again after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 – increased the potential for conflict. The same holds for Charles' neglect of regional interests (e.g. by refusing to call a parliament from 1629 to 1640), and his tendency to suppress discontent by force.

In Scotland, the tensions that lead to war in the British Isles erupted in 1638. The Scots rebelled against the imposition of a Church of England liturgy and church organization. Large parts of the lowland population signed a petition to preserve Presbyterian worship, relatively autonomous congregations and local administrative committees. Charles responded with strict sanctions and military force. By 1640, a Scottish army occupied the north of England, and Charles had to call a parliament for the first time since 1629. To do his duty and defend realm and church, he needed parliamentary approval of tax raises to finance the military campaign. Both parliaments called in 1640 placed a condition on their consent: parliaments were to be called regularly. This right gained further leverage when a rebellion broke out in Ulster (on the island of Ireland) in 1641 and the king was once again looking for money.

Parliament seized the opportunity to abolish the two crown-controlled courts of justice and to present a list of demands for constitutional reform to the monarch. Charles I refused, and amid civil unrest, the king attempted to have five House of Commons members arrested for alleged treason in January 1642. (Another event still commemorated in the State Opening ceremony today.) Certain that parts of the army were on the side of parliament, Charles fled the capital. This precipitated an armed conflict between Royalists (also known as Cavaliers) and Puritan parliament troops, known (for their short hair) as Roundheads.

Charles I was tried and executed in 1649, after he had lost the war against the Puritan army (the New Model Army) headed by Oliver Cromwell. While the killing of a divine right monarch looked like an unprecedented sacrilege to royalists inside and outside Britain, in the eyes of his accusers it was the monarch who had committed a sacrilege: he had waged war against his own subjects, and disobeyed the will of God. The king was accused as an individual (and his mortal body was executed) – the trial was not intended to abolish monarchy as such (the king’s second, immortal body).²⁵ A republic was established after intense debates, though, and welcomed by groups like the Levellers who advocated sovereignty of the people, or the Diggers who founded egalitarian agrarian communities. Their anti-monarchism and a deep distrust of state and church institutions were embedded in the Puritan conviction that they were erecting God’s kingdom on earth. In North America, these ideas were to live on when many Puritans emigrated after the end of the republic.

The history of parliamentary self-assertion against sacral monarchy had consequences beyond England. Parliament's decision to support Charles I's Irish campaign in 1641 virtually enforced the complete conquest of Ireland: the surety for the loan was land to be confiscated in Ireland.²⁶ Oliver Cromwell and the parliamentary troops gained notoriety for committing atrocities in Ireland in 1649. By the end of the 1650s, 40% of formerly Irish-owned land was English-owned, and 41% of the Irish population had died of war-related causes or had been deported as indentured laborers to Jamaica, a British colony since 1655, and the rest of the Caribbean.²⁷ Along with enslaved Africans (transported exclusively in English ships after an act of the Rump Parliament in 1651), they were the labor force exploited in the highly profitable, deeply inhuman transatlantic trade triangle between West Africa, the Caribbean/North America and Britain.

Representing the Republic

Monarchy was restored in 1660, when the representative of the republic, General Monk, handed over to Charles II. However, the principles of monarchy had never been abandoned whole-heartedly: Oliver Cromwell was offered the crown by the so-called Rump Parliament (minus the peers and bishops), but rejected it for the title of Lord Protector. His function, however, resembled that of a constitutional monarch.²⁸ In fact, constitutional monarchy under William III of Orange was the form of political representation that parliament finally settled upon in 1688/89, when the last Stuart, James II, left the country (he had come under pressure after the birth of an heir who would have become a Catholic king) and the protestant elite invited William of Orange to 'invade' Britain. As there was no significant resistance to the 'invasion', William III was crowned king of England as a consequence of this 'Glorious Revolution'. From now on, parliament was in control of taxation, legislation and the military.

According to historian Kevin Sharpe, England did not become a republic like the Netherlands or Venice because the eleven republican years remained trapped in the representational forms of monarchy. The republic failed to find new images, ceremonies, rituals and words to convince the populace of its legitimacy, and to create affective ties to the new polity.²⁹ The Puritan suspicion of rituals, splendor and theatricality (all associated with Catholicism and considered as a distraction from the purity of the word of God) certainly played a role here. But Cromwell

knew that a new political system needed new representational forms, both in terms of political representation and in terms of cultural representation. The Commonwealth was under collective rule from 1649, and Cromwell refused to centralize the power of the people-as-sovereign by embodying it. The Puritans dressed simply and wore short hair to express their ordinariness, the regalia were destroyed, and Cromwell asked to be portrayed without embellishment ('warts and all').

When he accepted the title of Lord Protector in 1653, however, authority had once again a single representative body, and Cromwell began to use existing visual genres for staging authority – mounted portraits, portraits in medieval armor – yielding to the demands of a political media culture that still thrived on the media infrastructures developed in the sixteenth century: from galleries with royal portraits to medals, cheap printed broadsides and commemorative ale pitchers.

Conclusion

This chapter began with an example for the contemporary commemoration of Guy Fawkes' conspiracy in the State Opening ceremony. Other parts of this ceremony at the beginning of a parliamentary session period allude to episodes in the history of increasing parliamentary power. One could argue that the celebration of disempowering the monarch's role while holding on to monarchy is somewhat self-congratulatory in a 21st century setting where democracy itself is increasingly coming under threat. The ceremony raises more fundamental questions, though: can sovereignty of the people be represented at all? In democratic polities, power is distributed, nonhereditary, impersonal and collective. Whenever elected representatives embody state power, the state itself or the people as a whole, they do so at the risk of homogenizing, centralizing and re-personalizing sovereignty.³⁰ Must the sovereign's place therefore remain empty in a democracy? Can representations of democratic structures by bodies, collectives or objects be restricted to strictly signifying functions, as Paula Diehl claims?³¹ And can democracies find ways to represent the element of contestation and debate that is inherent to their functioning?

1. See www.parliament.uk
2. Its origins lie in the fourteenth century, its modern form goes back to 1852.
3. Cf. Patrick Collinson, "Introduction", in: *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles. The Sixteenth Century*, ed. Patrick Collinson, Oxford: 2002, 1-17, here p. 4-5.
4. John Guy, "Monarchy and Counsel: Models of the State", in: *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles. The Sixteenth Century*, ed. Patrick Collinson, Oxford: 2002, 113-142, here p. 113.
5. Cf. Steven G. Ellis, "The Limits of Power", in: *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles. The Sixteenth Century*, ed. Patrick Collinson, Oxford: 2002, 47-80, here p. 59.
6. Cf. J. A. Sharpe, "Economy and Society", in: *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles. The Sixteenth Century*, ed. Patrick Collinson, Oxford: 2002, 17-44, here p. 34.
7. Cf. David McNally, *Blood and Money. War, Slavery, Finance, and Empire*, Chicago: 2020, p. 98.
8. Ibid. Philip Stern uses the terms 'corporate' or 'venture colonialism' to describe these developments; cf. *Empire, Incorporated. The Corporations That Built British Colonialism*, London: 2023, p. 10, 11, 18-25.
9. Cf. Ellis, "The Limits of Power", p. 71.
10. Ibid., p. 74.
11. Cf. Guy, "Monarchy and Counsel", p. 113.
12. Cf. Michael J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c.1550-1700*, Cambridge: 2000.
13. Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy. Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England*, London: 2009, p. xxv; my emphasis.
14. Ibid., p. 17-21.
15. Ibid., p. 130.
16. Ibid., p. 173.
17. Ibid., p. 412, p. 458.
18. Patrick Collinson, *This England: Essays on the English Nation and Commonwealth in the Sixteenth Century*, Manchester: 2011, p. 5.
19. Cf. Susanne Scholz, *Body Narratives. Writing the Nation and Fashioning the Subject in Early Modern England*, Basingstoke: 2000, p. 7.
20. Cf. Collinson, *This England*, p. 6.
21. Cf. Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, p. 389.
22. Ibid., p. 21.
23. Cf. Jenny Wormald, "Conclusion", in: *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles. The Seventeenth Century*, ed. Jenny Wormald, Oxford: 2008, p. 223-248.
24. John Morrill, "The Rule of Saints and Soldiers: The Wars of Religion in Britain and Ireland 1638-1660", in: *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles. The Seventeenth Century*, ed. Jenny Wormald, Oxford: 2008, 83-115, here p. 98.
25. Ibid., p. 104.
26. Ibid., p. 96.
27. Ibid., p. 113.
28. Ibid., p. 108.
29. Cf. Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars. Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660*. London: 2010, p. 388, p. 465-467.
30. Paula Diehl, *Das Symbolische, das Imaginäre und die Demokratie. Eine Theorie politischer Repräsentation*, Baden-Baden: 2015, p. 31.
31. Ibid., p. 246, 261.

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